

Ben Jackson. *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900-64.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. xi + 259 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7190-7306-9.



Reviewed by Antoine Capet

Published on H-Albion (June, 2008)

Equality and the British Left is not an easy book to read. Not that it is badly written: the author does his best to introduce clarity in a subject whose complexity is immediately apparent to anybody who has ever taken an interest in the Left. Circumscribing the theme to the British Left unfortunately does not make it any less complex, as the Left in that country encapsulates and epitomizes all the contradictions which make it so repulsive to some people--and so attractive to others. Jackson evidently numbers among the latter, ending his book on an impassioned plea in favor of continued egalitarianism, even though he commendably tries to maintain an attitude of scholarly neutrality in his description of the debate. A book written by an avowed opponent of the British Left would be of no interest: the author would "demonstrate" that in practice "equality" rings hollow in the vocabulary of the Left, that it is only a bogus catch-word to deceive the gullible populace in order to win elections--and that is that. But Jackson's self-assigned task is to study the dialectical contradictions (to use a phrase beloved of the continental Left) between theoretical considerations and perceived actual practice

the better to show how the British Left has tried to surmount them, and this is an extremely arduous one.

As the general editors of the series (John Callaghan, Steven Fielding and Steve Ludlam) rightly point out in their foreword, the circumstances are inauspicious: "it cannot be doubted that, compared with the immediate post-1945 period, at the beginning of the new millenium, what many still refer to as the 'labour movement' is much less influential" (p. viii). A phrase like "social justice" (repeatedly used by Jackson) is now widely seen as outmoded, the argument goes--and the author himself seems aware of its limitations. As he points out in his concluding chapter, "the emergence of second-wave feminism and movements for racial equality in this period [i.e., post-1964] placed other forms of injustice on the Left's political agenda, and issued important correctives to the focus on class-based inequality that had dominated the politics of the Left earlier in the twentieth century" (p. 225). Wisely, therefore, Jackson chose to concentrate on the heyday of the theoretical debate and practical attack on "class-

based inequality" before 1964 (the year in which Labour regained power after losing it in 1951).

The words "British Left" in his title must be understood in a wide sense, as suggested in the allusion to the "progressives" in the subtitle: his corpus includes men like the Liberals L. T. Hobhouse, notably for his influential *Elements of Social Justice* (1922), John Maynard Keynes (with a section on "Keynes and social justice" [pp. 120-123]) and William Beveridge (though "Beveridge himself was not fond of explicitly egalitarian language" [p. 138])—even Lloyd George is enlisted for his harsh words during the debates on his People's Budget in 1909 against the idle rich and the lords, who only owed their parasitic position to an accident of birth ("ordinary men chosen accidentally from among the unemployed" [p. 43]).

Naturally, however, most of the discussion is devoted to the great names which immediately spring to mind for the period which preceded the formation of the first Labour Government with an overall majority in 1945: J. A. Hobson (*The Crisis of Liberalism: New Issues of Democracy* [1909]), G. D. H. Cole (*Guild Socialism* [1920]), R. H. Tawney (*The Acquisitive Society* [1921]), and Harold Laski ("A Plea for Equality" [1930]). Curiously, Aneurin Bevan does not feature prominently (at least from a quantitative point of view) in the discussions on the post-1945 period: pride of place goes to Hugh Gaitskell (Labour Leader from 1955 until his death in 1963), Anthony Crosland (*The Future of Socialism* [1956]), Richard Titmuss (*Essays on "The Welfare State"* [1958]), Michael Young (*The Rise of the Meritocracy* [1958]), and Douglas Jay (*Socialism in the new Society* [1962]). Jackson navigates with great competence from one to the next, pointing out the borrowings ("Tawney explicitly drew on Hobson's terminology in *The Acquisitive Society*" [p. 44]) and the disagreements, with Rita Hinden of the Socialist Union movement denouncing the views expressed in both *The Future of Socialism* and *Socialism in the new Society* (p. 187).

It would be idle to try to list here all the "schools," "tendencies," books, pamphlets, and reviews which Jackson discusses: suffice it to say that all are more than adequately covered—nobody or nothing seems to have escaped his notice. People of the Left love a controversy, never more than on the nature of Socialism and its essential foundation, the egalitarian aspiration—therefore providing Jackson with plenty of material which activists and sympathizers will find fascinating while skeptics will spurn all as extremely tedious. The concluding chapter is a case in point, with its attempt at classifying the elements in the book along three main themes, the first of which is subdivided into "five features of the Left's commitment to equality" (p. 219). One lesson from Jackson's not unsuccessful attempt is that the Left has always been extremely fragmented—this of course we knew already, as readers will be familiar with the sometimes nasty quarrels between the adherents of the Second, Third, and Fourth Internationals—let alone the Anarchists. But Jackson concentrates on documenting the fragmentation among the mainstream British movement—the Labour Party and its inspirators and thinkers—and his monograph shows that the quarrels on the best means to achieve equality (redistribution via taxation, a managed economy with a large nationalized sector, "equality of opportunity" at school, welfare spending, etc.) were (and still are) hardly less virulent among these supposedly moderate Social Democrats.

In *What is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government* (1840), Pierre Joseph Proudhon (remembered for his famous exclamation, "Property is theft!") writes that "equality does not exist" and that it "rules all our thoughts, yet we know not how to reach it." [1] Not knowing how to reach equality aptly subsumes Jackson's excellent description of the British Left's unsuccessful gropings for the ideal society in the following century. The impressive list of primary sources in the bibliography will be found extremely useful by advanced students who want to

pursue the subject further. All the great writers of the Left are there--and even Winston Churchill (appropriately) for his *Liberalism and the Social Problem* (1909). Among the secondary sources, the nine unpublished Ph.D. theses listed (eight being submitted 1984-2001, and eight in British universities) show that interest in British Socialism is fortunately not waning in the academic world--and even if it were Jackson's superb monograph would no doubt revive it. Unreservedly recommended for doctoral schools--today's undergraduates would probably be put off by the arcane subtleties of Leftist nuances which their parents and grandparents enjoyed so much during their student days.

Note

[1]. (p. 224). Now online on the Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, <http://repo.lib.virginia.edu:18080/fedora/get/uva-lib:476338/uva-lib-bdef:103/getDynamicView?behavior=getObjectBrowse&id=d7>, accessed June 28, 2008.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Antoine Capet. Review of Jackson, Ben. *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900-64*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14600>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.